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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have described adolescents' sexual behavior and attitudes, there are little data available on the nature of the questions that occur to adolescents as they move toward maturity. A study was conducted to determine whether the questions children and adolescents ask reflect developmental differences in cognitive abilities and whether gender differences exist in the questions. Spontaneous questions anonymously submitted by young adolescents during a 2-week sex education program in school were analyzed. Questions came from seventh, eighth, and tenth graders. The 826 questions were assigned to one of 10 categories: (1) reproductive physiology; (2) health risks; (3) behavior norms; (4) intercourse; (5) contraception; (6) pregnancy; (7) slang; (8) communication; (9) disallowed questions on abortion, masturbation, or homosexuality; and (10) miscellaneous. The results indicated that younger subjects asked proportionately more questions about basic biology, clarification of slang terms, and intercourse than did tenth graders. Older students asked more questions about birth control, health risks, and communication. Boys tended to ask questions about slang terms and intercourse while girls asked about communication, relationships, and health risks. These findings suggest clear cognitive differences among the adolescents studied and provide evidence of cognitive and sex differences in adolescents' interests in sexuality. (NB)

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WHAT'S "VERBIL" SEX? AN ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT SEX

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WHAT'S "VERBIL" SEX?
AN ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT SEX

Numerous studies describe adolescents' sexual behavior and attitudes (e.g., Dreyer, 1982; Hass, 1979; Zelnick & Kanter, 1980). Less readily available are data on the nature of the questions that occur to adolescents as they move toward maturity. The present study reports an analysis of the spontaneous questions of young adolescents. Of interest in this research was to determine whether the questions children ask reflect developmental differences in cognitive abilities. In addition, because gender differences have been reported in behavior (e.g., Jessor, Costa, Jessor, & Donovan, 1983), a secondary goal was to study whether gender differences are also present in the questions chidlren ask.

METHOD

The questions analyzed in the present study were collected during

two-week sex education programs in schools. Students annonymously submitted questions they did not wish to ask publically. In deference to perceived community pressure, questions on abortion, homosexuality, and masturbation were not allowed. Students were seventh, eighth, and tenth graders enrolled in public schools in a rural area of California.

In all, 826 questions were analyzed. Ninety-five percent of the questions were assigned to one of nine substantive categories. Five percent were coded as miscellaneous and not analyzed. Category definitions and sample questions are presented in Table 1. Reliability of agreement on coding between two independent coders was 94 percent. Seventh and eighth graders asked 593 questions while sophomores accounted to 233. Sex information was available only for seventh and eighth grade students. Boys asked 173 questions and girls asked 241. The total number of students of each grade or sex is not known.

RESULTS

Separate Chi Square analyses were conducted for age (2) by question (9) and sex (2) by question (9). Approximately three percent of the students subbmitted two or three questions. The fact that some students asked more than one question constitutes a violation of the independence assumption for Chi Square. The impact of this violation cannot be known with certainty but is believed to be small.

Grade by question

The number (and percentage) of questions in each topic category is shown in Table 2. The overall relationship was significant ($X2$ (8) = 33.3,

p< .001) indicating that older and younger students differ in the types of questions they ask. Younger children asked proportionately more questions about basic biology than did sophomores (20.7% vs. 12.9%). They were about three times more likely to ask for clarification of slang terms than were older children (8.1% vs.2.6%) and they asked more questions about intercourse (14.5% vs. 9.9%). Questions about birth control (15.9% vs. 10.3%) and health risks (18.5% vs. 10.3%), however, were more strongly associated with sophomores than they were with seventh and eighth graders. Also, the older students were somewhat more interested in communication in realtionships.

Sex by question

The association between sex and type of question asked (Table 2) was significant (X2 (8) = 23.6, p< .01) indicating that males and females differ in the issues which interest them. The percentage of slang-related questions asked by boys was triple that asked by girls (10.4% vs. 3.7%). In addition, a higher percentage of boys' questions were about intercourse (19.1% vs.12%). Girls more often asked questions dealing with communication and relationships (12.9% vs. 3.5%). There was a tendencyfor girls to show more concern with health risks such as venereal disease (12% vs. 7.5%).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research indicate clear cognitive differences among the adolescents studied. The questions posed by the younger children suggest that their interest was with the more immediate and

concrete issues related to their developing sexuality. A dominant theme in their questions was understanding the basic facts of how their bodies are function and in clariying terms they heard.

The more sophisticated formal operational reasoning skills of older students were evidenced by the large percentage of questions related to consequences of sexual activity. These older adolescents showed their ability to engage in hypothetical thought. In Flavell's (1977) terms, sophomores appeared to have a "sense of the game." For example, they were interested in health risks such as sexually transmitted diseases. It appears from the prevalence of such questions that they were indicating their awareness of the importance of planning and developing strategies for dealing with potential outcomes of sexuality activity. Their questions about contraception similarly indicate an awareness of the importance of anticipating the consequences of their own activities.

The questions asked by boys and girls in the younger group clearly reflect sex-stereotypic behavior. Males for whom slang and profanity are more acceptable language codes, made almost three times as many requests for slang clarification as did their female counterparts. Girls, on the other hand, who typically exhibit more affiliative behavior asked almost four times more questions about relationships than did males. Interestingly, although males are generally regarded as being far less concerned with birth control and pregnancy than are females, the results of this study indicate that at least among younger children, boys and girls asked approximately the same proportion of questions about these topics. This unexpected finding suggests that male aversion to these issues is not as sex-typed in the lower grades as it appears to be later in development.

The middle school years may well be a prime time to use sex education programs to strengthen the sense of dual responsibility for knowledge about birth control and pregnancy.

The results of this research present clear evidence of cognitive and sex differences in adolescents' interests in sexuality. These data provide basic information to developmental psychologists and function as a source of curriculum for sex education programs.

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Table 1
Question Categories and Sample Questions

Category	Definition	Example
Reproductive physiology	Basic biological information	Is there different color sperm?
Health risks	Disease, damage	How do you get VD?
Beh. norms	Judgment about appropriate beh. or biology	If you get projnet (sic) should you marry the father of your child?
Intercourse	Mechanics, sensation	Where does the man put his thing?
Contraception	Efficacy, types,	What is a rubber?
Pregnancy	Biology, causes	Do you get pregnant on your period?
Slang	Definition of slang	What's head?
Comm.	Communication/ relationships	How do you tell someone you love them?
Disallowed	Abortion, masturbation, homosexuality	Do abortions hurt?
Misc.	Misc. issues	How much do hookers cost?

Table 2

Types of Questions Asked by Boys vs. Girls and by 7-8 Graders vs. High School Sophomores

	Slang	Preg.	Contra-ception	Inter-course	Behav. Norms	Repro-ductive Physio.	Communi-cation	Health risks	Disallowed topics
Male f	18	19	15	33	23	41	6	13	5
(%)	(10.4)*	(11.0)	(8.7)	(19.1)	(13.3)	(23.7)	(3.5)	(7.5)	(2.9)
Female f	9	34	16	29	30	56	31	29	7
(%)	(3.7)	(14.1)	(6.6)	(12.0)	(12.4)	(23.2)	(12.9)	(12.0)	(2.9)
7-8 Grade f	48	77	61	86	67	123	53	61	17
(%)	(8.1%)	(13.0)	(10.3)	(14.5)	(11.3)	(20.7)	(8.9)	(10.3)	(2.9)
Sophomore f	6	36	37	23	23	30	30	43	5
(%)	(2.6)	(15.5)	(15.9)	(9.9)	(9.9)	(12.9)	(12.9)	(18.5)	(2.1)

*Row percentages (10.4% of male-generated questions referred to clarification of slang terms.)